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AUTHOR Gardner, Cynthia H.
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ABSTRACT

Ethnography as a classroom observation method addresses itself to the situations, events, patterns, and contexts that exist in a classroom at a given time. A priori categorical observation and evaluation systems measure what the system is designed to "see," and may fail to record anomolies and salient events that affect teaching and learning in this one classroom. Through an ethnographic method, "clinical descriptions" of a classroom can be obtained and used for feedback. The intelligent, trained observer, in collaboration with the teacher committed to self-evaluation, can put ethnographic materials to immediate use in dealing with specific and unique situations. The clinical use of the ethnographic method, in conjunction with observers who have knowledge of the roles of supervisor, researcher, and teacher-colleague, seems to be effective in the objective observation of classrooms, in determining the needs of individual teachers, and in providing feedback for teacher improvement. (Author/JD)

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Friendly Strangers: Reducing Teacher Isolation Through Ethnographic Observation

Cynthia H. Gardner

Research and Development Center
for Teacher Education

The University of Texas at Austin

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Friendly Strangers: Reducing Teacher
Isolation Through Ethnographic Observation

Cynthia H. Gardner

When the Second Grade Study was in the planning stages in the summer of 1978 it was decided to use, in addition to several well-established quantitative observation methods and videotaping, a method of observation that was relatively new in the classroom and at that time somewhat controversial. It was called "ethnography" by most of the researchers who were using it, or, at any rate, talking about its uses and abuses. The method was borrowed by educational researchers from anthropological field work and its increasing use could be attributed to dissatisfaction with the ability of traditional methods of educational research to get at "what really happens" in classrooms.

At that time, despite a number of respectable educational studies already conducted using ethnographic methodology, there was still a great deal of disagreement as to its applicability to classroom research. Many researchers in the then-prevailing mode of classroom observation and laboratory experimentation--usually called quantitative researchers--were very slow to accept the ethnographic--or qualitative--methodology, basically because they did not consider it to be scientific in the sense they were used to thinking of "scientific." The quantitatively-oriented critics argued that qualitative methodology failed to satisfy the fundamental scientific requirements of generalizability and replicability. They argued this out of the prevailing paradigm of educational research which was to look for universal characteristics of teachers, universal prescriptions, and universal outcomes. What this viewpoint overlooked, however, was the value of that very aspect of ethnography under criticism: its potential as an idiographic, descriptive, clinical medium.

Although classrooms may demonstrate much that is universal, there also exist unique events, situations, patterns, and relationships that develop out of a particular interaction of time, place, and players. Our research purpose was to collect as much information as possible, but we were also extremely interested in the ethnographers' ability to identify these unique patterns in the classrooms. By unique we did not necessarily mean something that had never happened before and would never happen again--but rather a pattern that was simply characteristic of that teacher at that time with those students. What naturally then suggested itself was treating ethnographic data as case study material, which in turn suggested the potential for using the ethnographic data as feedback to individual teachers in a clinical setting. Carrying this out was not permitted in our study, but examples from the ethnographic materials will be given below to illustrate the possibilities inherent in the method for feedback to teachers.

Even among researchers who were convinced of the usefulness of ethnography, there was disagreement as to the form it should take. A number of early applications of the method were classically anthropological, where a lone participant observer immersed himself in the milieu of the classroom and the community for a year or so (Ogbu, 1974; Rist, 1978). Others modified the method to varying degrees according to the theoretical orientation of the user, the exigencies of the research site, constraints of the research contract, or for other reasons (See Herriot, 1977). The structure of our study required that we use ethnography in one of its severely modified forms. (In fact, out of deference to the purists, we eventually stopped calling it ethnography at all, and started calling it narrative observation. For convenience, however, this paper will refer to the narrative observers as "ethnographers" to distinguish them from the quantitative observers.)

Ethnographer Training

Rather naively, in the light of these complexities, two members of our staff immersed themselves for the summer in the literature of ethnography as a classroom observation tool, and developed a course of training for prospective ethnographers.

Since fundamentally we felt that good ethnographers are born and not made, we were more interested in persons who could convince us they had a natural aptitude for accurate, sensitive, and empathetic observation than in those with particularly high professional qualifications. The three people we hired were a graduate student in sociology, one in anthropology, and an educational psychology major. One of them had teaching experience. They all expressed a personal interest in developing skills as a classroom observer. They were trained over a period of four weeks (for a total of about 40 hours, including homework).

The ethnographer training consisted of activities and readings designed to accomplish four objectives. The first was to facilitate an understanding of the focus of the research study, which was teacher-student interaction during reading instruction. Briefly, to accomplish this objective, we brought in an expert to give the ethnographers a mini-course in elementary reading instruction. Our basic purpose here was to make them sensitive to the instructional decision points teachers come to that determine how and which different approaches, methods, materials, scopes, and sequences are applied in the classroom. We hypothesized that a background in reading theory and teaching practice would facilitate the ethnographers' ability to interpret levels of behavior. That is, for example, they would recognize when the teacher was ostensibly operating at the level of formal implementation of a particular reading program while still being aware of the level of

teaching the "hidden curriculum" (LeCompte, 1978), or what Goldhammer (1969) calls "incidental learning."

The second objective of the training was to establish the technique and orientation for a common ethnographic approach. This was achieved by having the ethnographers read theoretical and practical materials (see Appendix A), do exercises examining their own biases, and discuss their points of view until common grounds were reached. The third objective was to instruct the ethnographers in ethnographic techniques. This was mainly a technical question of developing forms for recording narratives, noise scales, and the other mechanics of collecting the data. For the fourth objective, to establish validity and reliability among the ethnographers, we had each one of them observe videotapes of a class that each of the others had seen and compared the narratives. Because of their own personal professional interest in ethnography as an observation tool, the two staff members observed the teachers during the same observation period as the ethnographer from time to time and the narratives were compared. The procedures followed for the fourth objective reflected our naivete at that time. The questions of validity and reliability, or "trustworthiness of naturalistic inquires" (Guba, n.d.), or "standards of descriptive validity" (Erickson, 1978) in classroom ethnography are very complex, and I will not go into them here. Suffice to say, as it later turned out, the videotapes were our most valuable resource for verifying the ethnographic materials (see Gardner et al., 1980).

At the completion of training the observers were sent into their second grade classes. The procedure followed by the ethnographers in the field was to take notes during the observation period, recording all events as fully as they could. As soon as possible after the observation, they were to

tape record an account of the observation which was to include embellishments, afterthoughts, and asides. Usually for the taped remarks the ethnographer went through her daily notes, filling in verbally where the notes were unclear or too cryptic, adding things she had failed to record but was now reminded of, and concluding with personal observations. The ethnographers were encouraged to develop their own hypotheses, but to be sure to separate their own speculations and ideas from the recording of daily events.

Clinical Descriptions

At the end of the year of data collection the ethnographers were asked to write a "clinical description" of each classroom. The three observers were given a good deal of latitude in the format of their clinical descriptions, with the result that we ended up with three rather different types of description. One observer wrote up each of her three classrooms as "a typical day," followed by some general remarks for each. The second described each classroom in a general way, then selected a number of categories of behavior for each teacher and some that applied across all four of her teachers and ranked the four teachers on the categories. The third observer choose to discuss her two classrooms in terms of more structural than behavioral categories, and also paid considerably more attention than the other two to patterns of personal interaction among students and between students and teacher with students as initiators.

In spite of the different approaches, and with some problems which will be discussed below, the clinical descriptions provide a vivid picture of life in nine second grade classrooms. One of the ethnographers in particular--the one who followed the format of a "typical day"--was able to make the texture of the classroom palpable. For the most part the patterns of

behavior, the contextual features, the teacher's personal and pedagogical style as described in all the clinical descriptions can also be seen in the videotapes, and examples found in the daily narratives. However, the clinical descriptions do have shortcomings which cannot be ignored. As discussed elsewhere (Kugle, 1981), the clinical descriptions attend considerably more to the affective dimensions of the teachers' styles than to the kinds of allegedly instructional behaviors to which quantitative systems are more sensitive. Furthermore, as was found in a study of critical events in the reading group (Clements, 1981), affective and management events are much more salient than instructional ones to all kinds of observers--those with classroom experiences and those without--apparently including our ethnographers. Our clinical descriptions do not provide us with many clearcut examples of an instructional style or behavior that can easily (if at all) be "unembedded" from its affective and/or management context. This may be due to the fact that two of our observers were not teachers or other educator-types with a thorough, professional knowledge of the mechanics and techniques of instruction (as one might acquire from either classroom experience or theoretical knowledge) and the one with teaching experience had not taught at the elementary level.

A final difficulty with our clinical descriptions is that two of the observers drew several inferences and advanced several hypotheses that we have not been able to substantiate by returning to the raw notes, although their descriptions are largely confirmed by the videotapes. It is very handy to have videotapes for this purpose, but also unusual. The daily narratives must provide the evidence for one's conclusions; the result otherwise is impressions and opinions which are extremely suspect. In the case of the erring ethnographers, their written notes simply were too

skimpy. This could probably have been avoided by better monitoring of the daily narratives to ensure that they were thorough and rich in detail, and more critical assessment of the clinical descriptions before the ethnographers became inaccessible to us.

In sum, at the end of the year of data collection, we had at least ten observations of each of nine teachers, videotapes, two interviews with each teacher, and nine clinical descriptions which, after heeding the caveats discussed above, showed us a good deal about the dynamics of nine different classrooms.

Applications of Ethnography

Many field studies are aimed at collecting data from which to generate prescriptions and/or innovations, the applications of which in a large number of classrooms are evaluated by further field study. These studies are based on a fairly traditional teacher "effectiveness" model, in which observable behaviors across classrooms can be related to measurable student outcomes as an indicator of effectiveness. This approach was cut off for us by our small sample of teachers and the fact that our student achievement gain analysis produced results which precluded any significant statements about the relative effectiveness of our nine teachers.

A different level of analysis is suggested by other researchers. Doyle (1978) stresses the importance of applying to narrative accounts constructs and conceptual frameworks that are "indigenous" to classrooms in order "to explicate(s) the structures and processes of classrooms in such a way that we can get an understanding of how classrooms work." The primary outcome of "descriptive research" here is understanding, which, he argues, is important in itself as well as being essential to "enable practitioners to connect prescriptions to specific problems." This avenue could be explored with this

data, although the small N will still be a hinderance in generalizing very far about how all, or even a good many, classrooms work.

The two applications of ethnographic methodology above--that is developing practical prescriptions for observable problems, and developing a basic understanding in classroom terms of classroom structures that will eventually, presumably broaden even more our prescriptive powers--have attempted to address the question of generalizability. However, having demonstrated the applications of ethnography to understanding teaching and classrooms in general does not--as noted earlier--require that we ignore the implications it has for particular classrooms and teachers.

As Berliner (1978) points out, "the connotations associated with the term clinical do not, on close examination, appear nearly as awful as might be feared." To the contrary, the clinical application of ethnographic observation is becoming recognized as one of its obvious and logical strengths. "Clinical" in this context can be defined somewhat as Goldhammer (1969) did:

> "The term should also denote supervision of actual professional practice, of actual practitional behavior. What the teacher <u>does</u> is central in clinical supervision of which one hallmark is that the supervisor is an observer in the classroom and that the observational data he collects represent the principal foci of subsequent analyses...
>
> Given close observation, detailed observation data, face-to-face interaction between the supervisor and the teacher, and an intensity of focus that binds the two together in an intimate professional relationship, the meaning of "clinical" is pretty well filled out. An image of idiographic analysis of behavioral data and a tendency to develop categories of analysis after teaching has been observed, rather than beforehand, completes the picture."

Goldhammer (1969) never uses the word ethnography, but his observation methodology falls well within the framework used in this study. Although Goldhammer writes of "an intimate professional relationship" between supervisor and teacher, there is a paternalism in his approach implicit in his vision of the supervisor as "expert." The supervisor is the member of the team with the wisdom and insight to select classroom problems for analysis and treatment. However, whether one enters the classroom as supervisor or as ethnographer, as Spindler (1955) noted 28 years ago:

> ...the educational system is a relatively...defensive field and a very sensitive one. There are some kinds of things present there that are not present in the usual field situation. One of them is a rejection of expertism; that is, external expertism. You come in and say, "I am an anthropologist; I'm here to observe you"--now there's a value and some covert culture involved here. "Observer," to a teacher, does not mean just to watch and describe; it means to observe, evaluate, and supervise. Suddenly you have this outside expert who is coming in to do something that has a familiar kind of ring, and the teacher can go berserk about your particular role in the situation. That can all be avoided by the proper kinds of communication...You have to explain and you have to go in and refrain from "observation." You say to the teachers, "I'm a student; "I'm trying to understand something about the situation; maybe you can help me to understand it." If you put yourself in this role, and do your participant-observation from that point on, I think usually you can become accepted.

Florio and Walsh (1976) advocate a collegial relationship between ethnographic researcher and teacher wherein they work together "in the posing of researchable questions, the formulation of hypotheses, and the gathering and analysis of data." But the researcher still eventually goes

away, back to his university or research center. Florio and Walsh suggest rescuing the teacher from falling back into isolation by bringing teachers together into a sort of mutual observation team, becoming "eyes and ears for each other on a continuing basis, using both their member knowledge and the techniques of field research." There are two major difficulties with this that come immediately to mind: (1) teachers don't have time to do field research on each other, (2) as we learned in our study, narrative observation is an exacting technique. Ethnography is not lightly undertaken. Whether the observer is participant or nonparticipant, the two adults in a classroom will interact. The teacher is aware of the observer, and the observer's theoretical knowledge, feelings, experience, devotion to objectivity, politics--you name it--affect the selectivity brought to the narrative.

Unless the observer has been trained to recognize and deal with these biases, they will be reflected in the data. Furthermore, as we found with our "skimpy" narratives, the observer must also be trained to record in depth and in detail. Finally, for the clinical application suggested here, the observer--and the teacher--should know how to analyze the information.

In an ideal world, the supervisor/teacher model, the researcher/teacher model, and the teacher/teacher model would be combined. The Utopian person thus created would have the supervisor's breadth of experience, the researcher's skill at observation (and humility), and the teacher's knowledge as an insider. The partnership between him or her and the classroom practitioner, to travel further into our ideal world, would be, in Goldhammer's (1969) words,

> ...inherently humane, conceptually tough, grounded in intellectual humility, and based upon a determination to discover more about reality and to construct behaviors that are rationally related to such discoveries.

Although we cannot make generalizations from our small sample, we can, within the limits discussed above, describe some ways in which the nine classrooms appeared to work, or not to work. Because of the design of the study, our observers were strictly nonparticipant. Nevertheless patterns emerge in their clinical descriptions which point to problems in the classrooms which, it is hypothesized, the ethnographers and the teachers could have worked together to address. In some cases--usually concerning organization and management--the teachers appeared to be aware of the problems, and attempted in various ways to deal with them. In these cases it would have been a relatively simple matter for the observer to share her perspective with the teacher. In other cases, the observer may perceive a situation the teacher is not aware of--usually a behavior which appears to the observer to have an undesirable affect that the teacher is not aware of. Sharing these observations with the teacher is, obviously, a more delicate question. Nevertheless, if we hypothesize that the observer is also a teacher, with the insider's capacity for empathy, it is easier to see even the most problematic areas being dealt with.

What follows are a few excerpts from the clinical descriptions and some very brief comments on the obvious usefulness of the information to the teacher. No strategies for approaching these issues are offered here--those are best worked out on site by teacher and observer/researcher/supervisor.

The observer writes:

> The tone of the class was almost always noisy. I seldom recorded a noise level below 3 and then only when the class was actively writing something. The teacher dealt with the students primarily on a one-to-basis, which tended to

allow the other students to do what they wanted while she was dealing with one student.

In this case the teacher was aware of noise as a problem, but presumably could have profited from the observation that her monitoring of the whole class faltered while she dealt with individuals.

The same teacher:

> She had the most awkward size room; the room being more the shape of a triangle than anything close to a square. As the student load in the room was around 22 students, the room was used to capacity. The teacher continually expressed frustration with the shape of the room and her inability to find an order to the room that allowed her and the students freedom of movement or easy organization. She changed the structure of the room at least three times after Christmas, trying the traditional rows of desks facing front, desks grouped in twos, and tables created by putting six or eight desks together. This last format was the one that best seemed to suit her needs. Organization of the classroom was important to organization of the class as this was a weak point to the teacher.

This problem might have been addressed by having the observer make activity or traffic pattern maps of the teacher's various arrangements to see which actually worked better.

The same teacher:

> It was my impression that this classroom had a particular problem with use of time and organization of activities. The narratives indicate that a great deal of time was lost in transitions from one activity to another, mostly due to lack of teacher clarity or authority in enforcing student response to new tasks. The teacher would tend to let the students get themselves ready which, given this class, took a long time. Or she would go down the list checking

> with each student individually to see if they were ready. I think the idea here was to give an example to the others to be ready but it didn't work that way. Between reading groups, students would come and distract her with related and unrelated questions (which she would listen to) and the same whenever a workbook or spelling assignment/test was given. The pencil sharpener probably has to be changed once a month for all the activity it sees in these transitions.

The beginnings and ends of transitions were noted by clock time in the daily narratives. The observer would have been able to show this teacher how many actual minutes were spent in transition. That shocking discovery would certainly have inspired the teacher to try something different in handling transitions.

Another teacher;

[These students are seated in the reading group area.]

> She announces that she is going to grade Page 25. She goes down the row of students, taking and grading each workbook in turn. The [reading group students] squirm, yawn, and look around disinterestedly as she marks their errors and returns each book with a low-key remark like "good," or "you need to correct this."

If efficient use of time and maximum engagement of students are the criteria, this teacher might want to reconsider her method of grading workbook pages individually as the students sit in reading group.

A different teacher:

> However, all the reading groups were exposed to fairly frequent interruptions. One reason for this may have been the teacher's vague rules about talking. She did not establish a rigid rule that students were not to talk at their desks. Her pronouncements about it, and her attitude toward it, were flexible. She would say things like, "Try to keep the talking down," "You're

> getting a little bit too loud," "You may talk quietly to yourself but not to your neighbor," or "Let's finish before we start talking." By giving them an inch, she was put in the position of constantly trying to keep them from taking a mile. When students crossed that fine line between acceptable and unacceptable levels of noise, the teacher's response was not very severe.

This teacher may simply need to clarify her own attitudes to student talking in her own mind. Seeing the evidence for and consequences of her "flexibility" would, we assume, encourage her to be more mindful of the need for clear and consistent rules.

The same teacher:

> The reading groups were not only interrupted by reprimands to talkers. A more serious problem was the other students' persistence in asking the teacher questions about their work while she was "in a group." This practice was against an explicit rule, but it was one of those rules that is more "honored in the breach." The teacher was very inconsistent about enforcing it. She usually allowed interruptions for questions at "off moments," when a group was getting settled or finding a page, for example. But like the talking, this tended to get out of hand. It reached a peak in late winter, when the teacher's attention was often divided between the reading group and outside questioners, especially during oral reading. She seemed to realize that it had become a problem and made an effort at more stringent enforcement of the "no questions" rule in the spring. It is interesting that, during this period, she pretended that the rule had always been followed, by herself and by the students. She would reproach offenders by referring to a non-existent reciprocity between groups "Do they interrupt your group?" They did, of course, but everyone except [one boy] acquiesced in the fiction that they didn't.

Again, as in the case of student talking, the teacher appears to need to clarify her own attitudes--assuming that doing so will contribute to formation of clear and consistent rules. Her inconsistency and the pretense that the rule had always been followed and that the groups didn't interrupt each other undoubtedly enforced the "hidden curriculum" mentioned by the ethnographer: given an inch, you should take a mile. Rules are not real.

Another teacher, who clearly would have benefitted from supervision or at least the team approach suggested by Florio and Marsh (1976):

> An additional disability was her physical isolation from the rest of the second grade team--the other three teachers have adjoining classrooms in a different wing of the school. Teacher 6 was unable to get the chance to observe others as much as she wanted. A major problem area in her instructional method according to her was her lack of experience planning for small reading group. Previously she had taught using large group techniques for homogeneous classes of students.

And:

> There were no clearcut rules in the classroom. It was difficult to tell whether students needed permission to leave their seats or whether students expected consequences for not completing work. Work load for students seemed somewhat less than in other classes so usually students were able to finish work quickly. They had time to visit and play because their work was so easy. At times they were given assignments which they had done before and the teacher asked them to do it again anyway.

The observer went on to say that "students who needed more structure and attention suffered in this class." That they "suffered" is a rather bold inference--but other data does bear out that they were mostly very poor readers.

And, finally, an observation which will be left to the reader as an observer/supervisor/colleague/researcher, as to whether to act upon it or not:

One problem with her teaching style involved her differentiation between girls and boys. In her rating scale responses she clearly had higher regard for her male students, although her female students tended to be more attracted to her. She often talked with the students as "ladies and gentlemen" and explained that ladies would get material first and that girls in dresses were allowed to sit in chairs during reading group. On other occasions she emphasized that "boys should know about wrestling" or some such comment reinforcing sex role stereotyping. Since so many of her students tended to model after her it seems that her tendency towards stereotyping might have destructive effects.

Conclusion

Ethnography as a classroom observation method addresses itself to the situations, events, patterns, and contexts that exist in that classroom at that time. Many of the situations, etc., are unique to that classroom and to that time, however universal may be the underlying structures. A priori categorical observation and evaluation systems measure what the system is designed to "see," and may fail to record anomolies and salient events that affect teaching and learning in this one classroom. But the intelligent trained observer, in collaboration with the teacher committed to self-examination, can put ethnographic materials to immediate use in dealing with specific and unique situations. We probably cannot afford many partnerships of the duration and intensity of, say Smith and Geoffreys in Complexities of an Urban Classroom (1968)--they even had coffee together every morning before school. But the clinical use of ethnographic observation in conjunction with a refinement of the roles of supervisor, researcher, and teacher-colleague seem to be indicated by the nature of the method, and by the needs of individual teachers.

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Appendix A

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